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JEREMIAH AS HIS NEIGHBORS KNEW HIM

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How many of us really feel that the prophets of the Old Testament were actually men and women? Is not our attitude somewhat that of the college student of whom Professor H. Moore Stevens tells the following story? He had been lecturing on the history of Solomon and his relations with the trans-Jordanic regions. After the class a student said to him, "Professor, do you really mean that Solomon was a real person? I thought he was just somebody in the Bible."

Every effort we can make to give a sense of record to the prophet is a gain. Dr. Longacre's article will help to make Jeremiah something more than a name.

The study of a prophet is often begun too far from the beginning. He appears in the Bible as one of the sacred authors; his work and authority have been accredited and vindicated; his religious position is firmly established; he has unquestionable historical importance; in brief, he is a prophet, he has arrived. When he is thus approached from the conviction of his assured greatness, it is easy to ignore the experiences which preceded his ultimate victory; to regard him as one aloof from the discouragements and perplexities that harass the souls of laymen; to see in him a perfection without a process.

Where mankind is concerned, this is not the divine order. The prophet was a man before he was a prophet. And any study that does not make due allowance for this hangs in the air, loses its touch with life, and becomes unreal and unconvincing. The search for the secret and significance of a prophet's character and work must begin as nearly as possible where he began. "That is not

first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; then that which is spiritual." Before any character can be understood, it is necessary to learn what conditions surrounded his birth and training, what his personal characteristics were, and what influences were operative in the years of his maturity. It may not be possible to discover these in any fulness. If so, the estimate of the man and his work must be to that extent tentative. Even then, however, if the man in question has left behind him a history of undoubted importance, the difficulty of securing adequate information regarding his early life is no release from the obligation, nor from the desirability, of doing the best that is possible with the materials that are available.

It is interesting to note that, in the case of Jesus, one of the evangelists (Luke) seems to have felt the importance of filling in as far as possible the story of the so-called "silent years" that preceded Jesus' public ministry. Even at the comparatively early date when Luke wrote, no material seems to have

been available, so that he has to content himself with the meager statement that Jesus "went down along with them [his parents] to Nazareth, and did as they told him"; and that he "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:51, 52). The latter statement is simply quoted from the story of the child Samuel (I Sam. 2:26).

In the case of Jeremiah, while there is little that deals directly with his early years, his book is rich in biographic material which indirectly supplies outlines that can be filled in without serious error. No other prophet had a biographer of such devotion and assiduity as Baruch, and while the present order, or disorder, of the book leaves much to be desired, it contains such a wealth of personal touches that the figure of Jeremiah stands out far more clearly than that of any other Old Testament prophet.

Jeremiah's home, Anathoth, a small town not far from Jerusalem, had been a residence of priests since the days of David. When Solomon came to the throne, it was to Anathoth that he banished Abiathar, the priest who had opposed Solomon's accession (I Kings 2:26, 27). It has been suggested, and it is not impossible, that this Abiathar, who was a descendant of Eli, was an ancestor of Jeremiah. This would carry his family back to the days of the Judges. But the fact that Jeremiah was of priestly descent does not necessarily connect him with those famous priests of early times, interesting as that connection would be. All that can be asserted is that the little Jeremiah grew up in a town where dwelt priestly families of ancient and distinguished traditions.

There can be no question that as the boy grew up he learned and treasured the stories of the great men of old. Not the least famous of these national heroes was, of course, Saul, the great first king of Israel, who had come from the tribe within whose bounds the little town of Anathoth was situated. Naturally, the stories the youthful Jeremiah heard were not told as scientific history, but rather as precious traditions that reflected the interests and aspirations of those who told them. In those days, and for many years afterward, no distinction was drawn between politics and religion, so that all history was religious history; and there can be no doubt that priests, who were the special custodians of the religious teaching, would not only preserve the traditions of the past, but would incorporate with those traditions their own interpretations and ideals.

The devastation of the Northern Kingdom a century before the time of Jeremiah stood out as a dark and desperate conclusion to a period of lessening loyalty to Jehovah, a period whose colors were all the darker in contrast to the tradition of Jeremiah's day, that Israel, in the still more ancient time of her sojourn in the wilderness, had been as a happy, faithful bride whom Jehovah had wooed and won. The tendency was as marked then, as now, to glorify the distant past—the more distant, the more glorious.

The traditions above referred to are to be thought of as mainly oral. It is impossible to discover what writings, if any, may have been at hand for Jeremiah to consult. Of the writings extant in his day, some were later incorporated in the Bible books, while many others,

and perhaps the larger part of them, have disappeared. It is doubtful whether Jeremiah, either in his youth or in his maturity, regarded any of these writings as having that sacred character which is today associated with the Bible. At that time the movement had barely begun which tended to regard any writing as having sanctity in itself. God was still recognized as a living God, speaking through the living voice of his prophets, rather than as a God who had enshrined his will once for all in a fixed and changeless book.

Jeremiah, however, had more to do than to listen to the stories of the past. Life called to him through many other channels than the reading of many rolls. His was a rich nature, observant, imaginative, poetic, and quickly responsive, not only to those aspects of life which appeal to the senses, but equally to those which are significant of spiritual backgrounds and origins.

On the testimony of his book, it is obvious that he was no recluse. He moved through life with open eyes and a loving heart. The pages of the book are richly strewn with allusions to the life of town and country. They are not dragged in as formal illustrations, but fall naturally and spontaneously from the lips of one who was at home among them. He had watched the farmer in the field (4:3), the children in the street (6:11), and the refiner of silver sitting over his crucible (6:27-30). He knew the strife of debtor and creditor (15:10), the humiliation of the thief when caught (2:26), the lamentations for the dead (16:5), and the innocent festivities of brides and weddings (2:32; 7:34). A good idea of the variety and spontaneity

of his allusions may be gained by reading a few chapters consecutively and underlining each illustrative reference. As in the case of the first Psalm (cf. Jer. 17:5-8), later Bible writers are often his debtors for ideas or imagery.

These allusions throw much light on the man's temper and spirit. They are used with such appreciation and with such sympathy that one is forced to conclude that they reflect an appreciation and sympathy that noted them in the first place. As the illustrations used by Jesus reflect the country life of Palestine, and as those used by Paul reflect the highly organized life of the Roman city, so these illustrations used by Jeremiah reflect a very real background; and indirectly, but quite reliably, they reveal much of his early experience and of his personal character. They portray him as a man at once discerning and friendly, one whose piety involved no asceticism, and one whose directness of appeal or rebuke, in later life, was based on a thorough knowledge of the habits and limitations, the needs and possibilities, of those whom he addressed.

His ability to make effective use of his early experience was due largely to intellectual powers at once reflective and alert. Here again the true order of development must be emphasized. He was a thinker before he was a prophet; or, one might almost say, he became a prophet because he was first a thinker. While such a statement is, of course, inadequate as an account of the whole fact, it is one which is essential. The intellectual vigor of the prophets generally has been submerged in their religious importance. For downright intellectual acuteness, as well as for

mental powers that gave them a firm grasp of difficult situations, they have no superiors in the Old Testament. One cannot read the first chapter of Jeremiah's book without realizing that this great soul dares to challenge even a divine impulse until consent can be based upon conviction. This attitude is conspicuous throughout his career.

On the other hand, Jeremiah shared with the other great prophets their condemnation of a religion that was unintelligent, or that grew out of ignorance. This has been obscured, if not entirely hidden, from many an English reader of the Bible through an unfortunate confusion of uses for the word "heart." In current figurative use this word stands for feelings and emotions, so that a heartfelt religion, or a "religion of the heart," is regarded as more earnest, more vital, and more valid than a form of religion that may be supposed to lack this "heart" element. The English Bible seems to confirm this view. The word is of frequent occurrence, and its contexts easily permit the piously passive mind erroneously to assume that when the Hebrew writer or speaker, 2,500 years ago, used the word "heart" figuratively, he used it in the modern English sense. This confusion is as misleading as it is unfortunate; or rather, it is unfortunate because it is so misleading. In the ancient, biblical use the heart was regarded as the seat of understanding, of the broad practical knowledge on the basis of which man orders his conduct in the life of every day. And this is Jeremiah's use of the word. Thus, the Hebrew expression "came up upon my heart" is the idiom, not for the modern "I felt," but for

"It occurred to me" (cf. Jer. 3:16; 7:31; 19:5; 32:35; Acts 7:23). When Jeremiah represents Jehovah as saying, "I will give them a *heart* to *know*" (Jer. 24:7), he speaks the same idiom as Jesus himself, who said, "Out of the *heart* proceed . . . *thoughts*" (Mark 7:21).

This Hebrew usage did not grow out of any lack of words by which to express the ideas of warmth, earnestness, or emotion. These phases of the life of the spirit were supposed to have their seat in the reins or kidneys or bowels. The modern expression, "heart and mind," the Hebrew would render as, "reins and heart" (Jer. 11:20). Occasionally, as at Jer. 17:9, 10, the translators have gone beyond their strict duty of translation and have rather interpreted the words in question. The same ambiguity occurs in the New Testament as well as in the Old Testament, e.g., Phil. 1:8; 2:1, where the English reader should compare the King James and the Revised versions.

It is difficult, indeed, for the modern reader to adjust himself to the Hebrew senses of English words, but this kind of necessity is inevitable in translations from any foreign language, and when, in the books of the prophets, the adjustment is once made, their spiritual values are seen in far clearer light, and an intellectual vigor is revealed that has been too long obscured. Jeremiah belongs in this intellectual fellowship, and the high position he holds in the gallery of the prophets is due, at least in part, to his mental gifts and to his intellectual power.

One other personal trait should be mentioned, and it is one not usually

attributed to him; namely, his courage. He was bold and vigorous, with a courage that was at once physical, intellectual, and spiritual. It was not a courage that was mere physical recklessness, but that deeper and more steadfast courage that is often found in refined and sensitive natures. In these courage has passed beyond the physical abandon springing out of an intense but transient excitement, and has become a vigor and endurance depending on an utter surrender to exalted principles clearly seen and firmly grasped.

It was by virtue of such high-souled bravery that Jeremiah was able to withstand isolation and persecution. His book offers no complete list of the physical dangers into which he was forced, such as Paul gives in II Cor. 11:24-27, but it reports at least two occasions when he was in danger of his life (11:18-20; 26:8). He had been placed in the stocks (chap. 20). Once he was imprisoned and left to die (37:16, 20); and at another time he was cast into a dungeon for the same fatal purpose (38:4-6). But none of these things moved him. Not only was his message searching and uncompromising, but his courage matched his message.

He has been called "the weeping prophet." This is due in part to the supposition that he may have been the author of the book entitled, *The Lamentations of Jeremiah*. But Milton is not a weeping poet because he wrote "Lycidas," nor is Tennyson a weeping poet because he wrote "In Memoriam," and neither is Jeremiah necessarily to be regarded as a weeping prophet because he may have written these touching laments, whose title, at least, is obviously

from some other hand than his own. There are a few places in his book that mention him as weeping, or as wishing that he might weep (9:1; 13:17; 14:17), but, surprising as it may seem, they are not more numerous than similar references to the apostle Paul (e.g., Phil. 3:18; Acts 20:19). And, indeed, these scattered suggestions cannot stand against the direct and indirect testimony of the whole book.

As a matter of fact, Jeremiah wept, just as Paul wept, and just as every Oriental wept, and weeps today. But he was no such lachrymose weakling as might be supposed from the mild aversion with which he is regarded by some energetic Christians, and still less from some of the cheap wit that claims him for its victim. Such a reputation is quite misleading and is contradicted by his whole history. He calls himself an assayer of the people, one in whose furnace the precious metal is separated from the dross. The word of God was in his heart "like a fire, and like a hammer that shatters the rock" (23:29). He was, again in his own words, "an iron pillar, a fortified city, and brazen walls against the whole land," and they fought against him but did not prevail (Jer. 1:18, 19; 15:20, 21). The opposition he aroused is alone a sufficient tribute to his force and vigor.

Gentle and refined he was, but neither timid nor tearful. Sympathetic, alert, courageous, he is the Invincible Saint of the Old Testament, with the force of the Hammer, the consuming power of the Flame, and the inflexible strength of the Iron Column. It is these figures that must describe him, and it is thus his neighbors knew him.